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Speaker 2:

Ahead on Pathways, becoming a nurse isn't always easy and not all paths are traditional. Hear how Northern Light Health is making it easier to get back to school and follow your nursing dreams.

Emily Tadlock:

Hello again and thanks for joining us on Pathways, part of our new Healthy, Happy and Wise podcast series. I'm your host, Emily Tadlock. Not everyone knows what they want to do when they're finishing up high school. Do you go straight to school? Is it two years or four? Can you afford it?

So what about when you finally do decide that you want to become a nurse? Northern Light Health has started a program to help make those dreams come true no matter where you're at in life. So here to explain a little bit about that is Carol Silsby, Director of Clinical Education at Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital, and CNA/nursing student, Andrew Barnes. Thanks so much for joining me, guys.

Carol Silsby:

Thank you for having us.

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah, thank you.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, so I'm going to jump right in first and start with you, Carol. Can you tell me what this program is? How does it work, et cetera?

Carol Silsby:

Sure. So this is a fantastic program for anybody who wants to become a registered nurse that you can come out of nursing school essentially either debt free or have minimal debt. So if you are an employee of Northern Light Health and you are entering your last two years of nursing school, you are eligible to get into our Work to Grow program.

So being in the Work to Grow program, you apply for it like you would apply for any other job with us. The hospital will pay your tuition and they will pay you full-time salary while you go to school and you work only part-time. And then, after school is over, you do have a work commitment where you work a number of years to pay off every \$10,000 that we invested in you for your training. So your work commitment would vary depending on whether you went to a private college versus a state-run college.

Emily Tadlock:

And you guys have partnerships with several different Maine area schools?

Carol Silsby:

Yeah. We have students here that are in the Work to Grow program that are attending four-year universities as well as two-year programs, but you're only eligible to get into the Work to Grow program

when you're in your last two years. So if you're starting a two-year program, you're actually eligible to start the Work to Grow program at the beginning of your nursing program. And if you're going to a four-year university program that's going to give you a bachelor's degree, you're not eligible to get into the Work to Grow program until you're getting ready to start your junior year.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay, that's good to know. That's really good information. So, Andrew, let's go to you. Tell me your story. How did you get started?

Andrew Barnes:

I graduated high school and, like a lot of people, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with my life. I worked at restaurants for a few years, didn't love it. I had a friend tell me about a PSS position, personal support specialist at a-

Emily Tadlock:

Thanks for explaining that.

Andrew Barnes:

... local nursing home. And I discovered that I really liked working with people, especially the geriatric population. So the natural sort of progression from there was going to CNA school. And then once I got my CNA certification, I went to a nursing home and got my feet wet and got comfortable, and I stayed there for six years.

Emily Tadlock:

So CNA is a certified nursing assistant?

Andrew Barnes:

Yep.

Emily Tadlock:

What did you have to do to become a CNA? Was that a short program or-

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah, it was an 11-week program and at the time I had to pay for it but, because I was low income, I was able to get help funding the program. But now, people basically get paid to take the CNA program.

Emily Tadlock:

Exactly. Northern Light Health has a program for that too. How about it? A little shameless plug there. So CNA for six years at a nursing home. Then what?

Andrew Barnes:

So then I met a girl-

Emily Tadlock:

As things go.

Andrew Barnes:

... as things go and where she lived, there wasn't a ton of employment opportunities. So I just applied to the ER in Ellsworth just on a whim, winging it, nervous, going from a nursing home to an emergency department, kind of a leap. And they hired me and I've been here for four years off and on since then.

Emily Tadlock:

Do you like the ED?

Andrew Barnes:

I do. I do. It's fast. It's busy. The day goes by quickly.

Emily Tadlock:

So you're also here at Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital where we're actually recording today. So you're a CNA in the ED department. How in the world did you decide, "I'm going to go back to school to become a nurse?"

Andrew Barnes:

So I thought about it for years. I started actually taking classes back in 2014, one at a time. And then, after working here and meeting some amazing nurses in the ER and on the other units, I was like, "These nurses are fantastic. I think I can do this." Great inspiration. And I got talking to them and half of them had associate's degrees and I said, "I can do a two-year degree." That's not hard at all. So I applied to college and got in at Eastern Maine Community College.

Emily Tadlock:

So you're at Eastern Maine Community College in Bangor. Where are you taking classes? Are you taking classes there?

Andrew Barnes:

So I am a part of the Work to Grow program here at Maine Coast Hospital. And we take all of our classes at we call it the satellite location, and it's right here in the building. I live right down the road. So I work here, I go take my classes here and we Zoom in with the rest of our class who's hosting in Bangor.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow. So you can do everything right from here.

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

You don't have to travel to Bangor-

Andrew Barnes:

I sure don't.

Emily Tadlock:

... a couple of days out of the week.

Andrew Barnes:

Nope.

Emily Tadlock:

And you still get to work here too. So you're still a CNA here?

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

Okay. Wait. So let's just refresh this. You're a CNA at Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital. You are taking classes to become a nurse at Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital, and Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital is helping you afford to be able to do this.

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah, it's a heck of a deal, honestly. As Carol said, I signed a contract with the hospital. They pay tuition and they're paying me full-time wages, so I get 40 hours a week. And then, during the college semesters, I only have to work 24 hours a week. So I get full paychecks, part-time work.

Emily Tadlock:

So you're essentially going to be able to finish up your schooling debt free and you already have a job lined up.

Andrew Barnes:

Sure do. And I live right down the road. My wife and I don't plan on moving very far away.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, you said your wife, is this the girl that you met?

Andrew Barnes:

Sure is.

Emily Tadlock:

Oh, look at that. Isn't that a nice, well-rounded story? Good for you, Andrew. And so tell me, some people might be nervous to think, "Oh, well, I don't know if I could work and do school and all the things or not be in a classroom, be somewhere that I'm not next to an instructor," but you are next to an instructor and how does it all work? How do you make it work?

Andrew Barnes:

So that was one of the things I was nervous about. How do I work full time and go to school full time? Because I've been chipping away at classes for five, seven years and I just needed to make the dive to go full time. And that's where the Work to Grow program really came in handy because I get a full paycheck. I don't have to juggle a full work schedule and a full college schedule, and I have a guaranteed job with, assuming I graduate from the program and I become a successful nurse, even better paychecks.

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Emily Tadlock:

And so, Andrew, obviously you were able to make it work and this program has been essential to you. What about classroom time? What is that like?

Andrew Barnes:

So it's really chill. We all get to class about nine o'clock in the morning.

Emily Tadlock:

I see Carol giggling at the really chill comment.

Andrew Barnes:

Really chill. There's six of us in our cohort here and we can see the rest of the class up on this large TV, Zoom. And we always have a proctor in the room with us, always, whether it's Carol or someone else who works with Carol, just to sit, supervise, monitor the Zoom session or answer any questions that we have. So we're not really alone in the room. We always have someone there and they have direct contact. The proctor has direct contact with the instructors in Bangor. So any questions that they have is pretty easily answered.

Carol Silsby:

And you can speak to the instructor directly at any time during the lectures. We can just open the mic and say that we have a question from the Ellsworth cohort.

Andrew Barnes:

Or type in chat, Yeah.

Carol Silsby:

So yeah, it's fantastic.

Emily Tadlock:

So it's basically like you're still sitting in the classroom, you're just a little bit farther away.

Carol Silsby:

Right. We save two hours of drive time essentially a day.

Emily Tadlock:

COVID made us all ... COVID was rough but it made us all really good and adept with technology and making things like this rural Work to Grow program work.

So I'm going to pause right now because we have now essentially talked about two different types of programs. One is the Work to Grow program, which anyone can apply to be part of. You have to have prerequisites. We actually have a website that you can visit, northernlighthealth.org/nursingedu to check out how that might work in conjunction with EMCC in particular.

And then, we've also talked about the RN sponsorship or RN Earn While You Learn program, which Andrew is taking part in. So you're essentially taking part in both programs.

Andrew Barnes:

Yeah.

Emily Tadlock:

They're just two separate programs. I wanted to make sure I made that clear because I think it can get a little confusing as we start talking about it. So, Carol, how successful has this program been?

Carol Silsby:

It's been fantastically successful. We have a cohort of six students currently here. Three of them are in our Earn to Learn program. They're all doing excellent academically. They're here during their clinicals during the school year, and they're just a fantastic part of our healthcare team. And really the students that have been in our programs, they're still here and still working for us. And it's really nice because they're invested in our community. They're local people and they're invested in wanting to make our hospital better.

Emily Tadlock:

And you can't ask for anything more than that. Andrew, talk to me a little bit about would you have been able to really, not to say that you couldn't have made it work, that you couldn't have figured out a way to do it, but would you have been able to become a nurse even as easily without the Earn while you Learn program?

Andrew Barnes:

Certainly not as easily. I'm a first generation college student. My parents didn't go. I have one distant aunt that went to school, so I came into college totally unprepared and Maine Coast has been super helpful in just kind of smoothing through that transition process for me. It's been really great.

Emily Tadlock:

We've talked about you doing this program. We've talked about you wanting to become a nurse. We've talked about you had a lot of influence here, but what really drove you to decide, "I really want to be a nurse?"

Andrew Barnes:

So I had an experience in my early 20s. I was having a procedure done at the local hospital and I was pretty nervous about it. It was kind of early 20s, barely coming out of adolescence. I was kind of nervous, it was kind of an intimate procedure. And I had a male nurse who was so relaxed, so nice, and he just made me feel completely at ease. And it was like that day because I had been in healthcare for a year at that point, and I was like, "You know what? I could do that. This guy was great. I definitely would like to be that for someone at some point."

Emily Tadlock:

That's incredible. And, Carol, you're also an RN?

Carol Silsby:

Yes.

Emily Tadlock:

How long have you been a nurse?

Carol Silsby:

I've been a nurse for 42 years.

Emily Tadlock:

Wow, gosh, I thought you were like 35. So how in the world-

Carol Silsby:

Thank you.

Emily Tadlock:

... could you be a nurse for 42 years? It doesn't make any sense. But tell me, why did you become a nurse?

Carol Silsby:

So when I was in high school, I actually was vacillating between whether I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher. My guidance counselors at that time told me, "There are no jobs for teachers, don't go into education." So I went into nursing because I really had an interest in both. I wanted to help people. And now I'm where I always wanted to be because I'm a nurse and an educator.

Emily Tadlock:

It's the best of both worlds for you.

Carol Silsby:

It is. Nursing is a fantastic profession. What you make of it is up to you.

Emily Tadlock:

And we are hearing that. We are going to continue to hear that throughout this entire podcast series. There are so many different variations to a nursing career and there's so many different ways to get there-,

Carol Silsby:

There sure is.

Emily Tadlock:

... which is incredible. And as you'll continue to hear as well, it's fulfilling for those that are doing it. And it's interesting for me because, listeners, I get to see the faces. I get to see the reactions. Carol over here is tearing up a little bit. I can see the passion exuding from all of you, but hopefully our listeners are hearing that compassion too, because you guys really do love what you do and you love taking care of people and you love taking care of your community. And that is just incredible.

So hopefully after this podcast, a couple of people will have heard about this program even and decide, "I could do that. With some help, I could do that." Carol, what would you say to encourage folks to look at nursing as a career?

Carol Silsby:

I think it's a career that has no limits. You can be a bedside nurse for the rest of your life. You can become a nurse educator. You can become a CRNA. You can become a nurse practitioner. There is no limit to

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what you can do with your initial degree. I mean, you will go back on to school and get additional preparation, but there is no limit. So it's a fantastic job. It really is.

Emily Tadlock:

And, Andrew, you're in your second year, right?

Andrew Barnes:

I'm starting my second year in the fall.

Emily Tadlock:

So getting ready to be halfway done. What would you say to encourage folks to start on that journey?

Andrew Barnes:

I would say a couple of things. I think a lot of people, I do it too, we have a tendency to build things up in our head to be worse than they are. You think about how bad it is, how hard it's going to be, but you just got to put a foot out. Just take a step, see how it is, and you'll find that there's a lot of people around you that are willing to help and it doesn't have to be that hard.

Emily Tadlock:

That's awesome. Well, thank you both so much for giving me some of your time today. And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of Pathways.

Speaker 2:

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